

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

King's Mountaineers hope to go deep in state playoffs

By GARY STEWART
Editor of The Herald

Kings Mountain High's baseball team enters the 2005 season with high hopes of winning its conference championship and going deep into the state 3A playoffs.

Second-year head coach Eric King has a wealth of returning talent, plus some talented younger players who will push the veterans for starting roles.

The Mountaineers are coming off an 18-8 season in which they finished 9-3 and in second place in the Southwestern Foothills 3A. But an upset in the conference tournament knocked them out of a state playoff berth and they've had a bitter taste in their mouths since.

On paper, this year's team should be a strong contender for the conference championship but King cautions that the players will have to stay focused and play "one game at a time."

Last year the Mountaineers led the conference race until the final two weeks, and a pair of one-run losses (to Crest and Hickory) knocked them off their perch. Then, they lost to Burns in the SWFH tournament and Burns went on to win the tournament to take away KM's state playoff seed.

"On paper, we've got a good shot if they'll just take it one game at a time and not look down the road," King says. "What happened last year may have been that we probably thought we were better than we actually were. We have to learn how to finish people off when we have them on the ropes."

Winning the SWFH won't be a piece of cake, though. Hickory has an excellent returning group that includes two Division I signees, and even though they suffered some heavy losses Crest has



Kings Mountain pitcher Josh Melton guns down a runner during a recent game with South Point in Belmont.

the potential to win its second straight league crown, King says. He also looks to Fred T. Foard to surprise a lot of teams.

With only two playoff spots available, every game could be a must-win situation.

The strength of a high school baseball team is usually the middle of the field, and King thinks he has an outstanding pitching staff, good catchers, middle infielders and outfielders

He has what he calls "six quality pitchers," led by All-

State right hander Tyler Leach who has already signed a letter of intent to play for Virginia Tech and who is also getting a look from major league scouts. Leach went 6-3 with two saves last year with two losses coming by one run. He struck out 103 batters and compiled a 2.03 earned run average

When not pitching Leach will be starting at either first or third base. He led the Mountaineers in hitting last year (.457) and most other offensive categories, including

home runs (8), hits (32), runs (31) and RBI (24). With the Mountaineers, he played first base when he was not on the mound but he played third base for the Gaston Post 23 American Legion team and King says that may be where Mountaineer fans will see him this spring.

"Tyler just worked so hard to get where he is today," King said. "He has elevated his game by working year round. He's a hard guy to beat because a lot of times he just refuses to get beat."

Leach's younger brother, Ryan Leach, a sophomore, will also see a lot of mound duty. He was 1-0 last year with 26 strikeouts in 20 innings. He has also improved tremendously and has good pitching mechanics. Both of the Leaches, though right handers, remind longtime Mountaineer fans of their father Tim, a southpaw who set the school career strikeout record while pitching the 1980 Mountaineers to the state championship game. Both have good speed for their age, good control and usually stay ahead of the hitters.

"Ryan works out a lot with Tyler and has made a lot of progress since last year," King says. "He has a lot of potential ahead of him. He's a gritty-type kid that's going to fight tooth and nail to get ahead. Both have picked up speed through weight training."

Josh Melton, who didn't play last year after being one of the team's leading hitters his sophomore year, will also see pitching duties. Most people will remember him as a right fielder but he has the size and talent to play just about anywhere.

"His physical build is pretty intimidating," King says of the 6-3 senior.

Another returning pitcher is southpaw Trey Glass, who did a good job for the Mountaineers last year in starting and reserve roles and also pitched for the Shelby American Legion team. He was 5-1 for KMHS with 27 strikeouts in 30 innings of work.

"Being a left hander is an advantage being able to spot his pitches" King says of Glass. "He's quiet but he's a competitor."

Brad Camp, a senior who couldn't pitch a lot last year because of injuries but who did a good job filling in at

See Mounties, Page 8